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SUBJECT: Damascus Media Reaction: Syria/Mehlis, Iraq (11/28)

1. Summary: The Syrian press reported President Asad's meeting with Prince Bandar Bin Sultan, Secretary General of the Saudi National Security Council, carrying a message from King Abdullah to President Asad.

Syrian papers also carried the full text of the TV interview broadcast by Syrian TV last night with the Kurdish masked witness Husam Taher Husam, upon whose testimony German prosecutor Detlev Mehliis had relied. Husam totally distanced himself from his previous testimony and disclosed in detail the way Lebanese intelligence used him as a fake witness against Syria. He refuted Mehliis's report, which he said included "groundless" accusations against Syria.

Husam added that the information branch of Lebanese intelligence raided his house after the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon and imprisoned him on a charge of involvement in a bombing in Lebanon.

Husam went on to say that Fares Khashan, Hariri's advisor, visited him in prison, offering to set him free and to ensure him a luxurious life, plus a sum estimated at millions of dollars, if he gave false evidence against Syria and Syrian officers. The money was offered by Saad Hariri in one of his meetings with him. Husam spoke in detail about the plot already prepared to implicate Syria in the assassination through fabrication of lies, under the direction of Khashan.

Husam also spoke in detail about the story of the Mitsubishi car which was used in the explosion that targeted President Hariri. He said the story was created by Khashan and one of the Lebanese intelligence elements. Husam said that Khashan fed him the Mitsubishi and other stories, such as the alleged phone call Husam received from one of the Syrian officers.

Husam affirmed that all Lebanese politicians he met with, such as Waleed Junbulat, Marwan Hamada, Ghazi Aridi, Gubran Thweini and Saad Hariri, who took part in the game, offered him large financial inducements, adding that he was subjected to immense psychological pressures, including an injection that paralyzed him for many days.

Husam indicated that the international commission received the Hariri family and the Future Block, who are members of the parliament, at its headquarters at Monte Verdi. The commission also received reporters from Future TV and Al-Mustaqbal paper.

Husam pointed out that the commission agreed, upon orders from the Hariri family, to record his statements.

Husam said that he tried to escape from prison three times. After each attempt he was tortured and intimidated to force him to complete his false testimony.

Husam also spoke about the role played by Jubran Thweini in introducing to the international commission another witness by the name of Ziad Halabi.

He strongly attacked the Lebanese media for its role in promoting lies, mentioning a number of Lebanese journalists who have relations with the American Embassy. He also mentioned visits paid by the French ambassador to the headquarters of the international commission.

Husam expressed his readiness to give testimony before any international court and to meet Lebanese politicians, journalists and security officials who fabricated lies. In Beirut, Al-Safir paper said that two different sources confirmed that Husam is the same masked witness who appeared before the international commission.

End of summary.

2. Selected Headlines:

"President Asad receives a message from King Abdullah of

Saudi Arabia. Prince Bandar: Syria's agreement with the International Commission is a wise and brave decision that serves the interests of the Umma" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 11/28)

"The masked witness exposes dangerous details about misleading justice. Husam Taher Husam: They tortured and intimidated me to make me give false testimony against Syria. Strange roles played by rancorous Lebanese politicians and journalists. Jamil Al-Saiyed and his friends are innocent, because I was forced to give testimony against them" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 11/38)

"FM Shara represents President Asad at the Barcelona summit" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, (11/22)

13. Editorial Block Quotes:

"Harmony over Righteousness"

Izz-al-Din al-Darwish, an editorialist in government-owned Tishreen, commented (11/28): "Some people, in their comments on or analysis of the agreement with Detlev Mehlis' commission, tried to offend Syria and its central pan-Arab role.... Those people are receiving guidance from foreign embassies and from the US intelligence agency, which has allocated huge amounts of money for the purposes of deception and hostile propaganda in the region....

"These rancorous ones, who are basically merchants of positions, brokers of votes, and sellers of media interviews, know that Syria never said it would not cooperate with the international investigation commission. Had they not been blinded by falsehood and prejudgments, they would not have fallen into the trap of denying Syria's cooperation and fabricating stories about this subject....

"Syria, from the very beginning, announced that it wanted to cooperate with the investigations because it serves Syria's interests that the truth about Al-Hariri's assassination be revealed. Time will prove how wrong those are who are leveling accusations at Syria.

"Syria could not bargain over the rights of its citizens who are wanted for questioning.... Syria obtained what it wanted, namely, that the testimony be given under the UN flag and that the witnesses return to their country after giving their testimony. This is a Syrian right that international legitimacy does not deny, and it does not conflict with the spirit of Resolution 1636...."

"Confidence in Innocence and Wisdom of Decision"

Elias Murad, chief editor of government-owned Al-Ba'th, wrote (11/28): "Famous foreign politicians and journalists rushed to portray Syria's agreement with Mehlis as a Syrian retreat. Syria has always expressed its desire to cooperate with the international community so that the truth about Al-Hariri's assassination can emerge.... The agreement fulfills Syria's demand that the interviews be conducted under the UN flag and that the rights of suspects be respected, including their right to return to their country.

"Hence, it can be decisively said that the international investigation commission responded to the Syrian desire, contrary to the claims promoted by some....

"The agreement that Syria reached with the investigation commission despite all the accompanying pressure was a result of persistent political activity and many contacts and visits by Arab and non-Arab officials, and the fruit of intensive Syrian contacts with the world. We must also take into consideration Arab solidarity with Syria and its leadership. There was also the solidarity of the peoples of the world, who feel that Syria has been wronged; that Resolution 1636 conflicts with international law; and that Syria, which has always respected international legitimacy, is an important country and that any clash with it would reshuffle the cards in the region and threaten international security and peace. But above all, the agreement was a result of the broad cohesion between the [Syrian] people and their leader. That came as a surprise to many people, especially those who wagered on seditions and pinned their hopes on foreign pressure to accomplish their sick objectives.

"Syria, in all its relevant actions, proceeds with absolute confidence that it is innocent of the crime of the Al-Hariri assassination.... Syria knows that it is targeted, and that whenever it overcomes an obstacle attempts are made to place new ones in its path. But ultimately Syria knows very well the price of its national and pan-Arab positions. It has paid heavy prices in the past. And now, when it says that it is ready for cooperation and confrontation at the same time, it is because it believes that it seeks not a confrontation but the implementation of international law, not only in the case of a mysterious crime like the Al-Hariri assassination, but also in the case of Israel's crystal-clear crimes in Palestine, its occupation of Lebanese territories and the Syrian Golan, and its continuous aggression against the Arabs...."

"Responsibility of the International Community"

Muhammad al-Khadr, a commentator in government-owned Al-Ba'th, commented (11/28): "The world must deal positively with the Syrian step and stop the misleading onslaught against Syria. This onslaught is linked not to the Al-Hariri assassination but to the US political agenda in the

region.... Syria has succeeded in explaining its viewpoint.... The deal with the investigation commission respects Syria's rights in the investigation process as stipulated by international laws and resolutions.... "After this agreement, which was reached on the basis of international guarantees and with Mr. Mehlis' consent, the Syrians -- government and people -- are not waiting for praise or welcome from US Ambassador John Bolton for their cooperation with the investigation commission. There were accusations, hatred, and threats of further pressure based on the report of the investigation commission despite the criticism that was leveled at the report by legal experts not only in Syria but also in the rest of the world. This campaign was harmful and it must stop...."

"What Is the Use? The Catastrophe of War still Exists"

Muhammad Ali Buza, an editorialist in government-owned Al-Thawra, said (11/28): "Condaleeza Rice's statement about gradual withdrawal from Iraq next year is most likely a maneuver and an effort to improve the shaky image of Bush's administration and the election positions of the Republican Party.

"More importantly, the statement is linked to the pressing situation on the ground and the growing and painful losses that are striking the heart of America's prestige and military doctrine.

"No one expects the conscience of the US Administration to wake up, and even if it does that will not bring life back to the thousands of Iraqis and others who have been killed by American wars and policies that, to say the least, are reckless, repressive, and highly threatening to the future of humanity.

"The American people, who are plagued by the mentality of their leaders, must create the required shock, correct and rationalize the destructive policies, and lift the immunity and protection of the traders in wars, chaos and fires, and make them understand, before it is too late, that their hands are not free and that there are red lines that cannot be crossed if world security, stability, and peace are to be maintained."

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